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## Legitimizing Violence: Functional Similarities of the Religious and the Secular Violence

Tahir Topal  
*University of South Florida*

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Legitimizing Violence: Functional Similarities of the Religious and the Secular Violence

by

Tahir Topal

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Religious Studies  
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College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Michael DeJonge, Ph.D.  
Adib Farhadi, Ph.D.  
Benjamin Goldberg, Ph.D.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this piece of work to all whom have served knowledge even it was the least little bit since the beginning of time.

I dedicate this piece of work to all whom never give up learning new and new things in every second of their life.

And last, I dedicate this piece of work to all whom never hesitated to chase the truth, to find out the truth, to tell the truth, to live for the truth, and finally if needed to die for the truth.

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## ABSTRACT

As a consequence of the separation between religion and politics, known as secularism, the discussion about violence has also been divided into two main categories –Religious Violence and Non-Religious Violence– in the modern Western academia. The tendency of the leading scholarly work in the discourse of "religious violence" is that "religion" is inclined to be violent more than secular institutions for several reasons. Therefore, the state's violence, as being secular, steps in to bring peace. And the foundational cause of the theories relies heavily on the essential differences of "religion" and the secular. With counter-arguments, William T. Cavanaugh and Talal Asad criticize the scholars in order to demonstrate that their theories are based on the construction of the society, which is created in the modern West by separating the two main public spheres in the first place. Plus, it helps the state to legitimize its own violence. The aim of this work, then, is to present the arguments around the subject of "religious" violence and to conceptualize the narrative of both sides in terms of the legitimation process of violence. Throughout the thesis, the comparisons of both sides show that the arguments which are created by the leading scholarship can apply to either side. However, the intention is not an effort to imply religion does not cause violence. Hence, the storyline of the "religious" violence by the mainstream theorists does not seem capable of separating the "religious" violence from the state's violence.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

In the history of humanity, violence is one of the most significant issues for a long time without any hesitation. Alongside the other threats to the public peace and security for individuals, it has been one of the most dangerous actions in daily life. We see a lot of interpersonal violence incidents every day in the courthouses and in the news. However, they remain individual events and do not necessarily pose a danger as a bigger problem for society. Amongst numerous variations in today's world, institutionalized/collective violence seems an increasing and more controversial type. There are two main institutions in the discourse that are labeled and are in conflict and causing massive violence: religious violence and secular violence.

These two institutionalized branches of violence have been discussed for a long time theoretically and conceptually in academia, especially in the Modern West. Philosophers, theorists, historians, researchers in Political Sciences and Religious Studies, and many others have made contributions to the topic. The explanations vary about the subject and seem very controversial considering the fact that in any type of violence, people, as broader title humanity, are affected mostly with a result of death. While some of them focus on only one side –almost always only religion–, some try to compare either party in terms of violence, violence only.

In this thesis, instead of discussing whether or not either branch has caused violence or what specifically makes them violent, it is preferred to review the Western ideology on the subject. For that purpose, the reference of the word and the concept of “religion” throughout the

project goes to its use in the discourse of “religious violence” that is created in the Western ideology rather than its practical side in reality.

The mainstream position in the discourse of religion and violence seems quite clear which is religion is inclined to be violent (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 8). This claim is collected from nine mainstream theorists by Cavanaugh in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (2009) and criticized thoroughly. All of these theorists, according to Cavanaugh, presuppose an essential distinction between religious and non-religious violence, which as a key feature of secularism, this presupposition expresses the distinction between “the religious” and “the secular.” Based on this secularist –separationist– assumption, religion in general and religious violence in particular are, according to the mainstream theorists, essentially different from the secular organizations/institutions and the secular violence by being “absolutist, divisive, and irrational” (Cavanaugh, 2009).

Admittedly the constructed separation exists between religion and the other spheres of the society, and we have been living in this order of life for more than three centuries in the West. Although there might be some types of differences in between religion and the others in today’s form of life, it should be pointed out that religion and the secular organizations and institutions are not completely different from each other in terms of “violence” if we approach from a more functionalist perspective as Cavanaugh.

Shortly, everything about this separation has been categorized as religious and non-religious in order to address them. Especially when the subject is violence, religious violence has always been kept separately from the state’s violence that is supposedly secular, which both of them can evenly be the two branches of institutionalized violence. If so, the mainstream theorists’ attribution of absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality exclusively to religion seems



questionable. Since these concepts are built on the separation and the so-called differences, the question arises: what might be the similarities of either institutions' violence based on these concepts?

Another problematic point can be expressed as the legitimation/justification process of violence. In the whole story of separation and relatedly reasons, labels, theories, and/or concepts, there is a legitimation, as long as there is violence. This does not necessarily have to be morally accepted by any authority. However, it is the fact that violence somehow has to be legitimized in the eyes of society. In this manner, Talal Asad analyzes the legitimation mechanism in his work *On Suicide Bombing* (2007) by mainly critiquing a philosopher Michael Walzer's theories alongside some other theories about the topic. As a conclusion, Asad states that "religious violence" is misunderstood by the West. Because there are no essential differences in the legitimation process between religion and secular institutions (Asad, 2007).

Apart from all these theories mentioned above and will be presented in the chapters, concepts in general and some of the foundational key terms in particular in the discourse seem to be misinterpreted by the scholars. The separation between religion and politics, relatedly religious violence, and secular violence, secular institutions are some of the terms. This misinterpretation causes many theoretical confusions and raises questions about the details. For example, ever since I started doing research about the relationship between religion and politics in general and specifically violence related topics, the very first question I have had to ask was, what does the author mean by "religion?" Do they make any clarification of the separation? ... Many other questions can be asked, as well. However, the main question of this work is that since the mainstream position is based on the supposed essential differences and the separation

between religious and the non-religious –secular–, are there any functional similarities in the supposedly religious and the supposedly secular violence?

That being said, this thesis is divided into four sections, plus an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter is the conceptual framework where the general concept of the “religious violence” is presented with the components that have been constructed to explain the situation and to frame the concept by the mainstream theorists in general. Chapter two is an effort to make clear the complexity of the idea of separation between religion and secular. In chapter three, the three main key concepts of the mainstream theorists are explained, which are their concept of religion is absolutist, divisive, and irrational. This position is criticized with counter arguments in order to show secular ideologies or institutions can also be absolutist, divisive, and irrational in the account of violence. Chapter four tries to analyze the legitimation process of violence in general and there seems to be no difference in the functionality of violence of either party. In the conclusion part, one of the arguments about the reason for what makes violence legitimate or illegitimate is presented which having the legitimate power helps the construction of today’s picture –religion is guilty, and the state’s violence is innocent for some reason.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE “RELIGIOUS” VIOLENCE

### 2.1 Introduction

Although it might differ for different subjects, almost every academic work needs some clarification of their framework in order to present its methodology and boundaries of the subject. To be able to achieve that goal, definitions of the key terms are one of the primary tools. Especially in the social sciences and the humanities, considering the numbers of the specific key terms of every subject, insufficient explanations and unclarified expressions of the concepts and terms might cause confusion and misunderstandings.

The word definition, here, has significant importance in the account of this work considering the complexity of the terms that are used in the literature, especially by the mainstream theorists. There is a big scale in the social sciences about the concern from a philosophical view of defining “*definition*” to giving a little information with a few words about any concept, term, abstract kind, or a thing for the sake of what something “*is*” or “*might be*.” For that reason, the aim of this chapter is an effort to draw the conceptual framework of the subject by defining a set of key terms related to the topic.

Thus, as the center of the topic, “violence” as a concept will be defined with some of its categories. Then, as if they “were” two sides of a coin Religious and Non-Religious types of violence will be discussed. In the last part, the root cause of the complexity of the concept which is the theories of the mainstream theorists will be examined.

## 2.2 Defining Violence

Violence is a noun where, depending on the concept, it can mean and be used with some of the terms that are assault, attack, brutality, cruelty, disturbance, fighting, struggle, or terrorism. The complexity of the word is in itself because of its connection to the all these other words and also the concept of it. In fact, the classification of the term varies so much, and the number of books that have been named as “violence” or include “violence” in their titles is countless.

In the literature, there are so many definitions of the term that are more or less have similar expressions. One of the studies led by the World Health Organization (WHO) is a detailly inclusive and explanatory report on the subject that can be a reliable source for a foundational reference. WHO (2002) defines violence as:

the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.

In other words, violence is a purposeful physical action to the other, which can either be a person or a group with a possible result of harming in several different ways such as physical injury, psychological or emotional damage, or death. Although it does not necessarily have to occur, victims might be affected both physically and emotionally from the same incident.

Based on the statements above and many other definitions in the literature, the “intention” of the action has a big significance in the process of violence. According to Setiya (2018) an intentional action is a process that the action itself begins with the idea possibly some time before the physical action starts happening. The importance of the process becomes more

related when we talk about violence because the act of violence does not come to existence all of a sudden out of nowhere if it is an intentional action. This period of time before and during the action essentially comes with violence, especially when we are talking about collective violence, which will be presented later in this work.

Violence is categorized under three major headings by the WHO (2002) in terms of the actors and the victims: Self-directed Violence, Interpersonal Violence, Collective (Organized, Institutional) Violence. First, it should be pointed out that this categorization does not clarify motivations, strategies, or actions particularly; however it helps us to understand the types in terms of the actors and victims. Second, this or another categorization does not mean that motivations or actions belong to only one category, especially interpersonal violence, and collective violence have a lot in common in the action-wise.

To begin with, “self-directed” violence is the one where the actor and the victim are the same people. Suicide and self-abuse can be counted under this category (WHO, 2002). The types of violent activities such as homicide, murder, robbery, rape, or sexual assault can be counted under the category of interpersonal violence. Even though every incident is considerably dangerous for public peace and health in general because of the number of cases every day around the world, this type of violence affects mostly the parties who are involved in the act as the victim and the actor.

The collective violence, on the other hand, is the main type of violence in this work. It is categorized under three main groups by the WHO (2002) which are social, political, and economic. Because of the separationist ideology of the mainstream theorists and possible others who rely on “the great separation” as Mark Lilla (2007) frames, our categorization for collective Violence is Religious and Non-Religious. This type of categorization is mostly a motivational

categorization rather than the effects of violent acts only. Because, as in the attack on 9/11, one single terrorist attack can cover three groups all at once. First, the attackers were from a religious extremist terrorist group which were politically/ideologically motivated. Second, the attack was to the World Trade Center which shows economy was one of the targets. And finally, the traumatic effects in social life –individuals or society– are still an ongoing problem. These Religious and Non-Religious types of violence will be presented in the next following sub-sections more detailly.

### **2.3 So-Called “Religious” Violence**

*“Religious” violence* is not a brand-new expression in academia. Especially after the horrific event on September 11, 2001, it became one of the most popular expressions. It is mostly performed as terrorist actions such as suicide bombings and murder. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) gives definitions of some of the terms in the report titled *Ideological Motivations of Terrorism in the United States, 1970-2016* (2017).

In that report, religious extremism is:

violence in support of a particular faith-based belief system and its corresponding cultural practices and views, sometimes in opposition to competing belief systems. Characterized by opposition to purported enemies of God, nonbelievers, or perceived evildoers; striving to forcibly insert religion into the political or social sphere through the imposition of strict religious tenets or laws; and/or bring about end times (START, 2017, p. 6).

When we look at the horrific events, they have not been related to just one religion. Many religions seem to be involved in violent activities, and categorizing the religions by the characteristics of these events seems impossible. First, Christians in the United States (US), Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, some local religious

communities in Africa, and many other religions and religious groups have been involved in such violent acts. Second, these religions cannot be classified as monotheistic or polytheistic, national or universal, or any other type of theological or sociological classification easily even though some of them have something in common such as being monotheistic religions like Islam and Judaism.

To be able to understand the violent activities of extremist religious groups, it should be pointed out that—even though there are some religious texts which tell people to fight or encourages them to be in conflict in a sense— religion is not the main cause of every single violent activity around the world by itself directly. Some of the events are religiously motivated, and that is a proof of religious violence. On the other hand, even though some terrorist activities may seem religiously motivated, in fact the aim can sometimes be political or economic.

Maslow (1954) analyzes human motivation and sums up the basic needs of humans into five sets of goals: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. According to him, when these basic needs are restricted, humans feel under threat in a sense. This situation leads them to go for an emergency protocol. In such circumstances, expectations can be unpredictable, which might be understood that there is chaos.

Related to that, if we go for further interpretation, feeling insecure takes us to the claims of religious extremist groups. In short, according to Juergensmeyer, their argument is that we are not secure; this secular state takes our religious rights away from us, and more (2003). When people take any ideology—which is a religious ideology in this case— as prior to basic needs, they may end up moving to extremist movements. Because when it is asked to violators, actors, perpetrators, leaders of the groups or anyone takes a role in these actions, what is the point of

killing innocent people, they claim that this is a war between good and evil (Juergensmeyer, 2003). This conflict between good and evil is named “cosmic war” by Juergensmeyer (2016).

#### **2.4 Secular and Legitimate Violence**

The other side of the coin is the non-religious/secular violence. The most basic meaning of this type would be that technically any violence that is not motivated with religious motives can be counted as Secular Violence. This explanation is based on the separation of religion and politics. Since the political realm is supposedly purified from so-called religious ideology in the western modernity; military actions, left-wing extremists, nationalist terrorist organizations are some of the examples for secular violence.

One of the important points in this category of violence is that not every secular violence is legitimate. For example, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is a militant terrorist organization with the aim of establishing an independent Kurdish state. The attacks of PKK all around the world and primarily Turkey since the 1980s are extremely deadly. Characteristically, PKK is a very secular organization and does not claim to have a “religious” motivation. In this case, it is secular violence but cannot be justified or accepted as legit violence by any legal authorities.

On the other hand, military actions –state violence– are considered both secular and legitimate violence when the state is secular. It is secular because there is no religious motive in state's war. It is also legitimate because our violence –as secular– necessarily has to exist in order to establish peace or “peacefulness of liberalism.” Or even it is under control, advantageous, rational, and more (Cavanaugh, 2009). These are just some of the popular labels being used by the mainstream theorists, and not the only criteria of making state's violence legitimate.



Another very important point in the subject of legitimate violence is the state's monopoly on violence. As the counter forces to terrorist groups and also the protector of the country, the nation-state has the monopoly on violence (Cavanaugh, 2009). Having a monopoly on violence in hands as legal authorities does not necessarily have to be a subject of criticism directly. But it does play a significant role in the process of legitimizing violence.

## **2.5 The Problem of Western Understanding**

As mentioned earlier, Cavanaugh calls the storyline of the “religious violence” created by the mainstream theorists “myth.” What makes this storyline myth, according to Cavanaugh, is that religion is assumed “a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life,” essentially separate from other social spheres like politics and economics, and also dangerously promotes Violence (Cavanaugh, 2009).

Before breaking this claim down into pieces, let us be clear about one very important point. Labeling the known concept of religious violence “myth” is not an attempt to imply that religion does not cause violence, and everything about it in academia is all wrong. Rather, his attempt is that the constructed concept of religion in which the theories about religious violence are based on needs to be discussed in more detail. Because the idea about religion being more violent than other ideologies or institutions is based on the construction (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 5).

The very first part that makes the case “myth” is that mainstream theorists take religion's invalid feature, which is religion itself stays beyond cultures and history in human life. Without any subjective perspective as in the violence, some of the religions may seem to have successfully kept their existence throughout history and achieved reaching out to many cultures. But, that version of religion represents the concept of religion pre-modernity. In the modern

West, religion is re-constructed and gained a brand-new concept (Fitzgerald, 2014). This perspective will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The remaining parts of the argument are also related to the constructed version of religion. The mainstream theorists rely on the essential differences between religion and other institutions and build their theories with reference to the distinction. According to this distinction religions like Islam and Christianity are more inclined to harm people than secular institutions like liberalism and Marxism. Because they are more “absolutist, divisive, and irrational.” This differentiation does not seem reliable because either side can be as “absolutist, divisive, and irrational” (Cavanaugh, 2009). At this point, it seems that they both have the same potential qualification to be violent.

After terrorism has become the biggest problem, the United Nations (UN) decided to take action about this professionally in 2015. This action against terrorism was necessary after the increase of terrorist attacks of “Islamic State” (IS), Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF), and others (Frazer & Nünlist, 2015). Because there are no borders for terrorism anymore. It is named as “Countering Violent Extremism” (CVE) after the summit in the White House in 2015 with the host of President Obama (Frazer & Nünlist, 2015). The name on the strategy depends on how countries prefer to name it, but two main terms are used mostly: Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) or Countering Violent Extremism.

In these strategies, –UN general assembly report A/70/674 (2015), US H.R. Report No. 114-344, (2015)–, radicalism is seen as one of the biggest foundations of religiously motivated terrorist organizations. There is no doubt that radicalization is one of the tools for those groups to use. But there is a problem of understanding what is to be a radical and how radicalization plays a role in violent extremism.

A general definition of radicalism, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is “belief in radical ideas and principles.” In this definition, there is almost no clue about the conceptual use of the term or analysis. One of the difficulties of defining radicalism is that the boundaries of it are not known. Although there are many attempts to defining radicalism, Borum (2011) says that defining radicalism and radicalization has always been problematic because of the attempts that are used to explain it. Whoever uses it to understand or to tell, the term shapes into a different form. According to Borum (2011), being a radical is not the only reason for being violent extremist, and being a terrorist does not require to be radical. There are many radical groups that are not violent or extremist, and there are some violent extremist groups that do not have radical beliefs (Borum, 2011).

As a result, for whatever reason –although none of the concepts or theories of the leading scholars thus far we find and criticize in this thesis is successful in finding a perfect explanation about it– religions can be supportive of violence under some circumstances as well as any other ideology. Yet we should bear in mind that religion, secular, violence, and many other terms can be challenging phenomena. If the starting points for such complicated subjects fail to analyze the roots and bases, the results of the theories cannot be reliable after all.

## **CHAPTER 3: THE BORDERS OF RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The modern construction of political order in the modern West as well “known” is secularism. In this ideology, the two main spheres of social life are separated: religion and politics. It is not only about the separation between religion and politics, in the most general sense, religion has been on the one side, and the other public spheres such as politics and economy have been on the other side. This separation led religion to be implicitly privatized and isolated from public life (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 69).

It is important for us to frame this social construct in order to address the supposed differences between religious and non-religious violence. With regard to the claims of the mainstream theorists –so-called religion is essentially distinct from secular institutions and tends to be violent– an effort of bringing some of the arguments about the separation would help us to understand what “great separation” *is* in terms of violence.

In this section, the sides of the separation and the two main forms of the separation – Laicism and Secularism– will be discussed in order to address the construction of the public settlement as well as the elements of the construction in relation to legitimizing violence.

### **3.2 The Idea of Separation: Secularism**

Conceptually secularism had begun as a political doctrine in the West. One of the simplest definitions of secularism, as Hurd (2008, p.12) says, is that it is a public settlement of the relationship between religion and politics. In this relationship, religion is separated from

other social spheres primarily from politics. There are different versions of its practice by the states all around the world since the separation started in the West. Two different versions of secularism exist in international relations, according to Hurd (2008, p. 23), which do not necessarily have to be completely different than each other: Laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism.

The process of secularism is called “secularization,” which is the settlement of the agencies of the politics and the state institutions through the political realm itself and society (Hurd, 2008, p. 13). Aside from this lexical definition of the term, Casanova (1994, p.7) discloses this process and summarizes it into three main steps: secularization as “differentiation, religious decline, and privatization.”

First, one of the very first requirements to have a separation, a thing needs its counterpart. In order secularization to mean something, in reality, the secular needs religion. Religion has always been on one side alone in this differentiation. On the other side, the differentiation mechanism works to divide secular spheres in itself in order to differentiate them from religion (Casanova, 1994, p. 20).

Second, one of the popular assumptions that is made about religious life in the West is expressed as religion is declining and will likely to do so until it is gone. Part of this assumption is true as a result of the secularization mechanism. But there are no real criteria to make that claim the absolute truth since it is impossible to know people’s faith in their heart and also what is to be considered as religious. Part of this step is related to the third step, which is privatization (Casanova, 1994, p. 25-35).

Third, by quoting from Schulchter, Casanova analyzes the two summarized points for privatization. After the secularization process with the new and alternative interpretations of life

which cannot fit into the new version of religion, religious beliefs turned into being more subjective. And, institutionalized religion is de-politicized by completed secularization, which is the result of differentiating the society (Casanova, 1994, p.35).

While the secularization is in the process as presented above, the differentiation and the privatization steps are more related to our subject. Secularism in general and these two specific steps, in particular, help to create the “myth” and also to legitimize the state’s violence. By differentiating public spheres from religion, marginalization is created in society and the public view. By doing so, that marginalization creates “a religious Other.” Hence, religion is potentially violent and has to be privatized. And it did lead religion to be implicitly privatized and isolated from public life (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 69).

### **3.3 Religion**

Speaking of privatization, in Western modernity, religion gained a new characteristic that can no longer be what it was before the separation of religion and politics. Due to the fact that defining “religion” as a term and a concept has become one of the most challenging subjects for scholars. Indeed, the number of works about defining religion or the concept of religion in the field is countless, and unfortunately, many of them fail at finding a definition that is a perfect fit for the concept (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 57).

Nongbri (2013, p. 16), in the book *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, investigates the situation by asking, “isn’t the problem the fact that religion is defined in so many *different* ways in contemporary discussions? It would take an entire book (or, more likely, several books) to catalogue the myriad attempts at defining ‘religion.’” Because of the massive amount of definitions, it is possible to see some expressions to clarify the concept of what the scholars use to point out their perspective. For example, Nongbri (2013) uses “the

modern notion of religion” to indicate his point, which is the common understanding of the term in the United States.

As indicated earlier, the concept of religion has –been– altered into a new form with secularism. A theory by Wittgenstein used in Nongbri’s (2013) work suggests that a word gets its meaning in the use of the language. Based on this statement, “religion” whatever it was is something very different in the modernity because it is separated from other public spheres and privatized in society. So, with this new form of religion from that time on, the meaning of it is also changed. As a natural cause, the mainstream position adopts this constructed form of religion in order to address their theories.

Giving a precise definition is not the intention of this work. Instead, it is to remark that during the modern era in the West, starting with the relationship between religion and politics, the entire construction of the society has –been– changed. And this alteration has impacted the social dynamics, theories, policies.

For that reason, religion, in the modern Western world, is a concept that supposedly has essential differences from politics and other secular institutions, is potentially violent, needs to stay in private, and after all these characteristic features, is a Western modernity constructed phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER 4: THREE KEY CONCEPTS OF “RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE”**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The mainstream theorists conceptualize religious violence and create three main concepts. Some of the concepts are presented in their respective books and others in articles and in chapters of collective works. These mainstream theorists are nine scholars who many of them are distinguished in their areas, and all of them have important ideas about violence as a subject. Plus, they represent different academic disciplines like theology, sociology, and political science (Cavanaugh, 2009).

The perspective about religious violence in the West is that religion, if not directly causing violence, at least tends to be violent more than secular ideologies and institutions. Moreover, the account of religious violence should be, by having “absolutist, divisive, and nonrational” characteristic features, kept separate from secular violence. Because it is assumed that our violence as being secular is “less absolutist, more unitive, and more rational” (Cavanaugh, 2009). He argues that this collective claim of the mainstream theorists does not seem the perfect fit for the problem. Because their narrative about separating religious violence from secular violence is incoherent. Also, they do not even have an understandable explanation about what religion means in the subject of Religious Violence (p. 16).

It should be pointed out that none of the critiques about the arguments are for the purpose of claiming religion does or does not cause violence. However, the purpose of the critiques, in this work, is the effort to show that the mainstream position cannot differentiate religious



violence from secular violence clearly by stating, “religion causes violence because it is absolutist, divisive, and insufficiently rational” (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 17). Because there is no dichotomy between the two sides in terms of violence considering these concepts of mainstream position.

## **4.2 Absolutism**

The theorists that are the concern of this part are John Hick, Charles Kimball, and Richard Wentz. In general, based on Cavanaugh’s analysis, these theorists can be critiqued in two main points. First, they assert that in the narrative, there is always absolutism that leads people to violence. Second, as it is the common issue of the West, their perspective about the concept of religion.

To take a closer look at the claims, Hick talks about the violence of Christians against non-Christians before modernity and mentions that as a religion, “Christianity” is absolutist. However, they left being absolutist in modernity because, according to him, they met different traditions –world religions– which made them leave being pride about old Christian exclusivism. Later on, he refers that Christianity is not the only religion that is absolutist; other religions have the same feature too. “The claims of other religions to absolute validity and to a consequent superiority,” he says, “have sanctified violent aggression, exploitation, and intolerance” (Hick & Knitter, 1987, p. 17).

The failure of the idea is that he keeps naming Christianity, Islam, and some other religions when he talks about the violence related to being absolute. His approach seems that as if only those labeled religions were absolutist and causing violence but not other institutions (Hick & Knitter, 1987). In another work of his, Hick (1989) discusses that it is impossible to include every religious tradition under one simple category, and if we are to make this simple

category wider to include all, that category would have had to cover some secular institutions like Marxism. Yet, his intention is to exclude those secular institutions to follow the Western ideology about religious violence (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 20-21).

Another scholar contributed to the “myth” is Charles Kimball, who claims when religion has absolutist features, it tends to be violent (Kimball, 2002). By referring to the major religions, he lists five points about when religion supports violence. According to him, not all religions have to cover these features, but the major religions are likely to have them. The list goes by starting with absolutism.

Shortly, he thinks that religious sources always need to be interpreted by people in religious systems. Those interpretations may differ from each other completely, even though the purpose of the interpretations is made sincerely. Amongst the interpretations, whichever one leads to the “level of absolute truth” gets embraced by the believers. And this eventually leads them to be violent extremists (Kimball, 2002, p. 49-52).

In his analysis, it seems that he goes through the process of becoming a violent step by step in detail. However, he is missing the point about what the outcome would be when we apply these steps into a secular institution like nationalism. Cavanaugh’s argument joins into the conversation here. What makes religious absolutism any different in that sense than a state war in the name of liberal democracy (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 23)?

The last theorist who thinks the cause of religious violence is the religious absolutism is Richard Wentz. His absolutism, according to Cavanaugh (2009), relates to people’s knowledge about religion. More specifically, he points out that “all the great religions of the world have taught that our understanding is limited; we cannot know ‘the Absolute’” (Wentz, 1993, p. 36). That unknowability of “the Absolute,” in other words, people’s ignorance, directs them to be

violent. As it is a problem of other theorists as well, he seems to be having some trouble while talking about what he means by “religion.” Because of that, he cannot clearly separate religious and secular violence.

### **4.3 Divisiveness**

This group of scholars finds religion’s tendency toward violence in divisiveness. In this concept, scholars mention that religion has some divisive characteristics and separates itself from other religions, societies, or ideologies. With the privilege of their religious traditions, they are different than the others and can sometimes be violent to others because of the others’ wrong beliefs.

The first author, Martin E. Marty (2000), talks about the divisiveness of religion in his book *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good*. He summarizes his argument about how religion directs its followers to be violent by saying:

those called to be religious naturally form separate groups, movements, tribes, or nations. Responding in good faith to a divine call, believers feel themselves endowed with sacred privilege, a sense of chosenness that elevates them above all others. This self-perception then leads groups to draw lines around themselves and to speak negatively of “the others.” . . . The elect denounce “others” for worshipping false gods and often act violently against such unbelievers (Marty, 2000, p. 25-26).

In order to differentiate religion, Marty provides five features when describing religion, in which all five of them can also be found in politics. They are “religion focuses our ultimate concern, builds community”, uses symbols and myths, and “is reinforced through rites and ceremonies, requires certain behaviors from the believers.” It is not necessary to analyze every

point but, just like religion, politics and many other secular institutions do require some certain behavior from the supporters (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 27).

Based on the description of religion by Marty, if these five features make a thing religion that is divisive and because of that, it leads believers to be violent, then what makes politics any different than religion in terms of violence? First of all, in the check-list, politics can be checked-in in that list for all five features. Second, secular ideology itself is the demonstration of separation. It is not clear what really is the difference between religious and secular violence (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 27-28).

Mark Juergensmeyer is one of the well-known scholars on the subject of religion and violence. In his book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2003), Juergensmeyer provides a wide survey that he did with extremist groups. He starts his book by referring to some of the groups which are under the category of world religions and stating that they were first violent, and the motivation of the acts was religious (p. 4). Then he continues, “religion has provided the motivation, the justification, the organization, and the world view” (p. 7). The world view has a significance here because his argument about religious violence relies on the concept of “cosmic war.”

Cosmic war is the war of values and the fight for something larger than life (Juergensmeyer, 2016). They claim that the war is between good and evil, and they are trying to save their religious values. The claim, according to them, is the modern concept of life –as shaped secularism in the West– is stealing their religious values by separating religion from other public spheres, the nation-state has the sovereignty, and the power over the society, therefore our fight is a cosmic war (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

According to Cavanaugh (2009), the storyline of cosmic war takes Juergensmeyer to symbolism. Because of the claims of the terrorist groups and the attacks have symbolic targets. And it appears to be the only thing that distinguishes religious violence from secular violence in Juergensmeyer's argument. But he skips "the symbolic nature of politics" (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 29).

David C. Rapoport is another scholar who talks about religion and violence. He has five main reasons for the relationship between religion and violence. According to Cavanaugh (2009), in one of the five points, Rapoport claims that religious language is the problem because the narrative has a lot of violent content (p. 37). Although the details and the examples of his argument differ from the other authors, Rapoport, too, fails to give a clear explanation about why religious violence should be distinguished from secular violence.

#### **4.4 Irrationality**

Cavanaugh describes the arguments of this group of scholars as "the claim here is that religion is especially prone to violence because it produces a particular intensity of nonrational or irrational passion that is not subject to the firm control of reason (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 42). Even though this argument can be examined under the title of absolutism, it differs from absolutism because of the emphasis on the irrationality of religion by the scholars.

Bhikhu Parekh talks about religious irrationality in his article *The Voice of Religion in Political Discourse*. The claim refers basically to some characteristics of religion, such as religion is dogmatic, impatient of compromise, often absolutist, self-righteous, and arrogant. And these characteristic features sometimes create an irrational and powerful threat to society and conflict to politics (as cited in Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 42-43).

His view on the distinction between religion and politics, on the other hand, serves the “myth” perfectly. He admits that drawing the line between religion and secular ideologies can sometimes be hard. In his book *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, he says:

several secular ideologies, such as some varieties of Marxism, conservatism, and even liberalism have a quasi-religious orientation and form, and conversely formally religious languages sometimes have a secular content, so that the dividing line between a secular and a religious language is sometimes difficult to draw (Parekh, 2000, p. 73).

Nevertheless, religion keeps being a threat by having the irrational feature. Based on the quote above, how can we separate religion and secular institutions from each other if they can have the same characteristics as being impatient or having power over society?

The second scholar is R. Scott Appleby, who is the author of *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Appleby, 2000). According to Appleby, religion does not necessarily tend to be violent; however, it is a “powerful medicine,” which brings a passion that can be used for both ways: peace or violence. These peaceful and violent views of religion come from the religion itself. Because, first, it is capable of being violent in so many ways and of going above the limits of rationality. Secondly, there are many believers that are not violent despite the uncontrollable commitment to the faith (Appleby, 2000, p. 4-6). It is a good approach for him to remark that religion is not inclined to be violent altogether. This standpoint helps not to blame every believer in the practical side of the discussion as it helps in the radicalism that is mentioned earlier.

However, he still accepts that other side of the discussion. The main problem of his argument derives from his perspective on the concept of religion. In his attentive definition of religion, his position seems selective. His extensive description appears to be exclusive of

Hinduism and Buddhism. Cavanaugh argues that “what appears to separate religion from other `integral cultures` that form personal and social identity is the perceived encounter with the sacred” (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 45).

Lastly, Charles Selengut also talks about religious violence in his book titled *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (2003). The separation between religion and any other sphere in social life is very clear in his description. Being faithful is different than “ordinary social rules and interactions” (Selengut, 2003, p. 6). He continues “ordinary judgment, canons of logic, and evaluation of behavior simply do not apply to religious activity,” and this makes religion irrational.

For the relationship between religion and violence part, Selengut applies to human nature than religion directly. He outlines that “religious battles against competitors or those labeled enemies, are merely ways of allowing the human collectivity to express its pent-up anger” and refers that those who use religious narrative to justify the acts are just trying to get rid of temper (Selengut, 2003, p. 49). Even though he puts his effort to say it is not religion, according to Cavanaugh, he is not very successful in how religious battles can be not religious? His perspective on religion is not very clear, and this complexity makes his argument even more complicated (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 50-54).

## CHAPTER 5: LEGITIMIZING VIOLENCE

### 5.1 Introduction

While how the conceptual analyses and theories that are drawn by the mainstream position based on the separation are discussed above, the argument of the legitimization mechanism is another major problematic aspect of the theme of religious violence and also this work. The effort of this chapter is to draw attention to some of the arguments about under what conditions violence can be legitimized, what is the difference between those types of violence in terms of legitimization, and what helps to legitimize violence. Yet this thesis is not taking any position to make any judgment on the subject, and the legitimization mechanism seems significantly important for the account of public concerns, which certainly affects the moral judgments of it. Moreover, in the discussion, there is no justification for either violence from the perspective of this work, it is only tried to be presented from a neutral perspective.

In the book *On Suicide Bombing* (2007), Talal Asad presents the western ideology on terrorism and talks about how it became complicated by the effect of western media. He examines the issue in three chapters and an epilogue. By examining the concept from a theoretical perspective, Asad criticizes Western ideology. Because, according to him, even though especially the United States in the West had its own home growing terror, after 9/11, the idea of terror changed and turned to religious violence primarily Islamic terror with the help of Western media. In summary, the narrative was created by Mr. President Bush saying that the attacks were “more than acts of terror, they were acts of war,” and we should counter them. After



that statement, the narrative was completed by the media: War Against Terrorism (Asad, 2007, p. 7-8).

It should be noted that no matter what kind of theory we use or argument we develop in the discussion, the main problem in the violence of either party is all about killing people. But the complication of the Western ideology is that while the legitimation process of the secular and supposed religious violence are sharing the very same path, the supposed religious violence is considered unjust and the secular violence is urgent necessity to protect the Western values.

As Walzer phrases it in his book, *Arguing About War* (2004, p. X), when we are talking about war, it should be connected to “the business of killing.” This phrase is important here that it represents the purity of the action from any judgmental comment. Because either way, in the acts of terror or during a war, innocent people get affected by dying or getting traumatized. By any means, we cannot deny the fact that it is a moral issue.

In this chapter, three central points of legitimizing violence will be presented. First, Asad’s critique about the legitimation of the state’s violence takes place in order to bring attention to the “immorality of death dealing.” Second, how the mainstream position facilitates the secular state to legitimize its own violence will be shown. Finally, the process of radicalization will be mentioned to compare the motivations of practitioners of both violence.

## **5.2 The Concept of Legitimizing Violence**

After a broad examination, Asad comes to the conclusion where he claims some of the reasons of acts of terrors, which have put terrorism and especially suicide bombing in a very complicated understanding, can be religious, but not in the sense that West understands and interprets it (Asad, 2007, p. 95). Based on Asad’s argument, the concept of this particular branch of institutionalized violence –religious violence– is misinterpreted by the West.

So, the problem here is that we have two branches of institutionalized violence –religious violence and state violence which is war– that the latter one is considered as the legitimate violence because of the other side’s lack of progression. This lack of progression basically refers to the nonliberal, nonmodern culture. On the other hand, supposed religious violence, which is usually considered as “terrorism,” is illegitimate. What makes one different than the other is one of the main questions that should be asked in the first place. Asad’s (2007, p. 2) position on the subject, as a summary, is very clear: “however much we try to distinguish between morally good and morally evil ways of killing, our attempts are beset with contradictions, and these contradictions remain a fragile part of our modern subjectivity.” Then he summarizes his analysis in three points:

the creation of terror and the perpetration of atrocities are aspects of militant action in the unequal world we inhabit, of our notions of what is cruel and what is necessary, and of the emotions with which we justify or condemn particular acts of death dealing (Asad, 2007, p. 2).

An analysis of Asad’s argument can be more explanatory to observe the complication of the process. The judgement of any violent activity in modern ideology comes with prejudice that is the modern West has progressed and religious societies have not reached to that progression. This ideology creates a subjective way of thinking and helps to make a decision about who has the privilege to kill. Instead of considering the cruelty of the business of killing, the attention gathers around the motivation and the actors. If we looked at the cruelty of any institutionalized violence, we would easily see that even more people die in the state’s actions than terrorist attacks. Asad particularly states that “modern states are able to destroy and disrupt life more easily and on a much grander scale than ever before and that terrorists cannot reach this

capability” (2007, p.4). Nevertheless, the cruelty of dehumanization and the killing does not concern the West as much as who kills and with what motivation it is performed.

One of the main arguments Asad critiques by using Walzer’s argument is that war can be legal under some circumstances. Some of those conditions are self-defense or the security of the state. As a foundation of this claim, according to Asad, Walzer uses existing international law where violence can be legitimized in certain ways, as domestic law can do it with the limit of national boundaries (Asad, 2007). We can see the position Walzer takes here, Asad says, “terrorism is not only illegal and therefore morally worse than killing in war; it is worse even than the crime of murder.”

For the moral part of the discussion, Walzer uses “emergency ethics” concept where a morally strong leader who supposedly have authority and the ability to protect the society from the terrorists and evil. In addition, again supposedly, in the opposition to the enemy who is morally evil as being terrorist, “we recognize at the same time the evil we oppose and the evil we do, and that we set ourselves, so far as possible, against both (Walzer, 2004, p. 49).” Asad criticizes here that Walzer is not making a clear point by using the phrase “so far as possible.” Because the term cannot guarantee certain fairness. Plus, the morally strong leader can make wrong decisions (Asad, 2007, p. 18). However, this concept can be accepted as evidence to prove that the modern state has hegemony on the concept of religious violence and can conceptualize it with its modern criteria.

Another point that Asad brings is that it seems the motivation of the attacker has always been important more than how many people die. Of course, the reason why people die is always an important point, but with Western subjectivity, it is not considered as important when people die in a war. For example, both World Wars were state wars, they had no connection with

terrorism, and more importantly, they both were during the modern era, and the societies were “modern.” Additionally, both of them secular wars with almost no religious motivation. If we look at the numbers of how many people died during those wars, terrorism cannot even get close to those numbers. The intention here is not to take them equally, but the numbers and the catastrophe should also matter, at least when thinking through a human life.

In addition to that, the position of the mainstream theorists helps the secular state legitimize its own violence. Because the *myth* is constructed based on the “essential differences” and it “helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peacemaking, secular subject” (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 4). Additionally, it can also be used to motivate citizens of the nation-state to do violent acts for domestic politic purposes. Since this *myth* is constructed by the West, it labels other societies’, especially Muslims’, violence as “irrational and fanatical” because they have not achieved to have the Western values in politics. For that reason, “*Our* violence, being secular, is rational, peacemaking, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain *their* violence. We find ourselves obliged to bomb them into liberal democracy (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 4).”

As it is mentioned earlier, radicalism seems to be seen as one of the most important attitudes of the terrorists in the CVE policies of the United States and the United Kingdom. Radicalism might not be the main cause of danger by itself directly in the first place because it is not the only reason to be violent. However, it might potentially be a dangerous tool when it is used to motivate people into violent activities because of the capability of orientating people into fundamentalist, extremist ideas, and actions.

Borum (2011) creates a list that includes three components to describe the method of radicalization by the motivators of terrorist groups. These three steps seem to explain the process

of legitimizing violence. First, “developing antipathy toward a target group,” which causes to become a hater to the other. Second, “creating justifications and mandates for violent action” that enables to take the horrific events reasonable by the believers. And last, “eliminating social and psychological barriers that might inhibit violent action,” which helps the perpetrators not to feel guilty.

### **5.3 A Critique of the Process of Legitimizing Violence**

First, during the decision process, we already have pre-judgments, and we cannot act objectively. Based on Asad’s argument, the legitimation process advances in favor of the modern West. One of the particular reasons for this advancement is that the religious side of the conflict does not have fixed values as we do in the modernity. That mentality always stays in our minds when thinking about the morality of killing and dying, and subjectively affect our judgments (Asad, 2007).

Second, presumably by the authority of liberal notions, the secular forces try as hard as possible to fight against evil on both sides. Even though the reasons for establishing an enemy are arguable, it is understandable to fight against an established enemy. However, how is it possible to avoid any potential damage to societies and innocent civilians by being so much subjective in almost every possible step of the entire “myth” or storyline of religious violence?

Third, the mainstream position, either wittingly or unwittingly, provides an opportunity to the nation-state to legitimize its own violence by creating the myth. In the critique of the “myth,” we discussed the arguments that the mainstream theorists use, do not stand well, and mostly selective on the subject. For example, a set of scholars talk about the divisiveness of religion and based on that, and they come to the point where religion becomes violent. So, the very first

question to be asked here is that isn't it the secularism itself divides the social spheres from each other as religion and the others?

Fourth, the list of Borum (2011) can be applied to both sides of violence and would perfectly fit without a problem. Targeting a group and developing antipathy towards them looks like it can be a mission of any type of organization. Encouraging to be violent by justifying the action also does not seem to have any side in the separation whatsoever. And, writing a sweet story about the act in order to calm the social reaction down can always be helpful for the practitioner of both sides. So, they do not have to feel uncomfortable by killing the other. If this is the case, then what keeps us saying that the state's violence process works identically the same just as radical religious violence?

Finally, the sovereignty of the state plays a big role in the process of legitimizing violence. By having the power of ruling and being the protector of the realm, including the values and the security, undoubtedly, that power would have some active duty. Regardless, at the beginning of the alteration of the society, the transfer of loyalty to the national state from church did not stop violence, rather the process transferred the ideal of killing or sacrificing oneself over as well (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 10).

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

With the separation of religion and politics –secularism– in the modern West, the construction of the society with all its elements has –been– changed. Religion got its share from this separation and transformed into a new concept. In this new concept, religion has been separated from other public spheres such as politics and economy. Due to the separation, theories about religion and related subjects have been studied and advanced with consideration of this separation.

Religious violence has also been affected by this separation. Especially in Western academia, many scholars in the field have created their theories with this view. Right after the horrible attack to the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11, religious violence as a research area became a massively popular subject for theorists, politics, and media.

The mainstream theorists took their positions on the subject by starting with the separation and built them onto it. The main storyline of the theories by them is that there is something out there called “religion,” and it tends to be violent. And there are essential differences between the religious and secular violence. Although the differences in the claim can be categorized in different ways, Cavanaugh classified them under three concepts based on their arguments: Absolutism, Divisiveness, and Irrationality (Cavanaugh, 2009).

In absolutism, the scholars demonstrated that there is an absolutist aspect at some point somewhere in the religious narrative, which leads people to be violent. Divisiveness represents that religious identities, beliefs, and traditions have the declaration of being different than

other traditions. According to the theorists, those differentiations lead them to violent activities. The argument about irrationality relies mostly on passion in religious traditions. That passion either leads the believers to being violent or being unreasonable which makes them uncontrollable.

In the counter argument, Cavanaugh (2009) argues that the very same absolutism does exist in some other institutions which happen to be secular. Divisiveness is already in the nature of secularism by separating religion from other public spheres. Finally, religion is not the only irrational phenomenon that gets affected by passion. Besides, most of them fail to give a precise explanation about what they mean by “religion” when separating the religious violence from secular violence. And also, giving a precise difference about what makes religious violence different than the other because based on the arguments can also have the same characteristics – absolute, divisive, and irrational.

This failure takes us to the concept of religion in modernity, which is discussed right before the three main concepts of mainstream theorists. According to the constructivist theory, “religion” is a Western, modern concept that is constructed in the modern West by separating it from the other public spheres. In this process, religion has gained a brand-new form by being separated and privatized. Most of the theorists do not acknowledge the fact that their theories are also constructed on this very construction of religion.

While “the *myth* of religious violence” is theorized as such, the second part of the thesis is that it appears to be no difference in the legitimation process of religious and secular violence. In the discussion, the effort is made to point out that there is an exceptional approach when legitimizing secular violence. In other words, the morality of the business of killing depends on who killed and with what motivation did those actions are practiced. The interest of Western



modernity focuses more on the motivations than humans' lives. That perspective, according to Asad, comes from the self-righteousness of Western modernity. Furthermore, the "myth" makes a lot of contributions to the legitimation of secular violence by finding religion to be responsible.

Admittedly, any argument on the subject is debatable. Once and for all, the purpose of this work is to highlight the discussions of the storyline of religious violence and basic comparison of the legitimation process by referring the two very respectable work –*The Myth of Religious Violence* and *On Suicide Bombing*. Evidently, the theories that are discussed in this work are not capable of providing perfect explanations. As a future research recommendation, analyzing essential and functional features of the relationship between religion and politics as a further step in terms of violence, and maybe, finding a middle ground of the approaches to redefine the story of violence would provide us a better understanding.

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